

VZCZCXYZ0003
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUL #1004/01 1370127
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 160127Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0001
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 4294
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 8730
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4436
RUEHSH/AMCONSUL SHENYANG PRIORITY 3708
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RUACAAA/COMUSKOREA INTEL SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RHMFISS/COMUSFK SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001004

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/19/2017
TAGS: [KS](#) [KN](#) [PGOV](#)
SUBJECT: WORLD VISION KOREA WELCOME IN NORTH KOREA

REF: SEOUL 499

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Yun. Reasons 1.4(b/d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: DPRK officials are rolling out the welcome mat for World Vision Korea, according to Park Chang-min, the North Korea Division Director who has managed its North Korean projects since 2001. After resisting expansion of the NGO's potato-seed project last year because it would require extensive surveys of agricultural land near Taehondang, on the Chinese border in the northern Ryanggang province, the DPRK is now encouraging the NGO to go ahead. Park, who travels to Pyongyang or other parts of North Korea roughly every month, said that he believed North Korea was facing a serious food shortage, accounting for the change in attitude toward his NGO. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) World Vision Korea (separate from the international NGO) has a uniquely favorable status in North Korea because its counterpart organization is the National Economic Cooperation Federation, rather than the more politically-oriented National Reconciliation Committee (reftel). Even so, World Vision officials have told us previously that the DPRK only grudgingly allows NGOs to embark on food or medical projects, carefully limiting South Koreans' access to ordinary North Koreans. But when Park Chang-min went to meet his counterparts at the Kaesong Industrial Complex on May 13, he was told that World Vision should immediately expand its potato-seed project in Taehondang, and could carry out the extensive surveys of mountainous agricultural land in the area as needed -- an element that DPRK officials had resisted for two years. A team of three World Vision officials and several other ROK agriculture specialists will travel to Pyongyang in late May to finalize the agreement and expects to begin the survey in June. The Taehondang project is one of World Vision's 14 projects in North Korea, which include several fruit and vegetable farms and medical projects; half are in and around Pyongyang, where the DPRK tends to want NGOs to operate.

¶3. (C) At the May 13 meeting, DPRK officials had also cleared the way for World Vision to have direct contact with the DPRK Ministry of Agriculture, which the NGO considers important in its effort to teach North Koreans the technical aspects of cultivating virus-free potato seedlings. Given the ability to survey soil conditions in potato-growing areas (since some seeds that grew in South Korea would not grow in North Korean soil) and given wider access to agriculture officials, Park said that World Vision now aimed to have the North Koreans develop the ability to produce and sustain their own potato seedlings within three years.

¶4. (C) Park said he sees the change in attitude as directly

related to the DPRK's food shortage, which DPRK counterparts he has worked with since 2001 have alluded to, and which he said was more serious than he expected when it was first reported in the media. But he added that he did not see other ROK NGOs getting the same friendly treatment, because of their more suspicious counterpart organizations.

¶5. (C) Commenting on the DPRK food situation, Park said that during a recent visit to Dandong, Chinese farmers told him that they were angry about Chinese Government restrictions on selling food across the border, and his impression was that the small amount of black-market trading still going on was small compared with the level in recent years. He also said that he noticed an unhealthy pallor in people's skin on a recent visit to the outskirts of Pyongyang, and that a hotel he stayed at in the area had no radishes, a staple for making kimchi, to offer guests. Since North Korean hotels usually have ample food, this implied that the surrounding countryside was short of food. Park said that his DPRK counterparts acknowledged the food shortage privately and asked for additional help with radish seeds and other seeds, but that the DPRK government was too proud to ask the ROKG for help.

¶6. (C) Park said that June and July, before the August harvests of rice and potatoes, would be the most difficult period for North Koreans. Even after that, the DPRK's food situation could continue to be serious in part because the ROKG, apart from not providing fertilizer and rice, was also not providing vinyl sheeting traditionally provided in the spring and used to protect rice seedlings for later harvests.

¶7. (C) Park expressed an interest in media reports suggesting that the USG would soon provide food assistance to North Korea. Noting the difficulty in arriving at a solid agreement to monitor food distribution, he said that when World Vision built a noodle factory outside Pyongyang, the NGO insisted on getting a complete list of the names of the people who were to receive the noodles, and Park himself supervised the checking off of the names on the lists. Asked whether the USG should consider providing seed assistance, he said that, if so, research would need to be done on site, because North Korean soil conditions were unique.

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